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THE CONVENTIONS OF THE MUSIC-DRAMA

By BRANDER MATTHEWS

I.

IN an illuminating criticism of the operas of Puccini, contributed by Mr. D. C. Parker to the *Musical Quarterly* for October, 1917, there is a passage which may serve as a text for the present paper. The British writer pointed out that in "Madame Butterfly" the Italian musician struck out a new line in his choice of a theme widely different from those which had hitherto appealed to composers in that he deserted the old world of romanticism and of picturesque villainy, preferring for the moment at least a world which is neither old nor romantic and in which the villainy is not picturesque.

We breathe the air of these times and a modern battleship rides at anchor in the bay. Opera is a convention and a realization of the fact should throw some light on the suitability of subjects. It was not without reason that Wagner insisted upon the value of legendary plots, and I am sure that it is a reliable instinct which whispers to us that there is something wrong when Pinkerton offers Sharpless a whiskey and soda. The golden goblet of the Middle Age, the love-philter of Wagner, we can cheerfully accept. But a decanter and a syphon break the spell and cause a heaviness of heart to true children of the opera-world.

This is sound doctrine, beyond all question; and yet Mr. Parker based it only upon a reliable instinct, without caring to go deeper and to ask why we are willing to quaff a love-philter from the golden goblet and why we hesitate to sip a draught mixed before our eyes from syphon and decanter. Yet he hinted at the reason for our acceptance of the one and for our rejection of the other when he reminded us that "opera is a convention." But it needs more than a realization of this fact to enable us to develop a reliable instinct in regard to the subjects most suitable for operatic treatment. It needs an inquiry into the exact meaning of the word *convention*, as Mr. Parker here employed it. Perhaps we may attain to a solid ground than that supplied by a reliable instinct if we ask ourselves what is the necessity of convention in any of the arts, more particularly in the art of the drama, and most particularly in the art of opera.

No doubt, these questions have often been asked and as often answered, although the responses have not always been wholly satisfactory. This is no bar to a re-argument of the case, even if there is no new evidence to be introduced. The French critic was wise as well as witty when he declared that "everything has already been said that could be said; but as nobody listened to it, we shall have to say it all over again." Moreover very few of us are conscious of the immense number of conventions by means of which we save time and spare ourselves friction in our daily life; and still fewer have taken the trouble to understand either the necessity for these conventions or the basis on which they stand.

A convention is an agreement. In the arts it is an implied contract, a bargain tacit and taken for granted, because it is to the advantage of both parties. In the art of life the spoken word is a convention and so is the written word. As Professor John C. Van Dyke has aptly put it in the opening chapter of his suggestive discussion on the 'Meaning of Pictures' when we wish to convey the idea of water to a friend we do not show him a glass of the fluid, we pronounce the word, which is by agreement the symbol of the thing. If we write it we use five letters, w-a-t-e-r, which bear no likeness whatever to the thing itself, and yet which bring it to mind at once.

This is the linguistic sign for water. The chemical sign for it H_2O , is quite as arbitrary, but to the chemist it means water. And only a little less arbitrary are the artistic signs for it. The old Egyptian conveyed his meaning by waving a zigzag up or down the wall; Turner in England often made a few horizontal scratches do duty for it; and in modern painting we have some blue paint touched with high lights to represent the same thing. None of these signs attempts to produce the original or has any other meaning than to suggest the original. They are signs which have meanings for us only because we agree to understand their meanings beforehand.

If we do not agree to understand the blue paint touched with high lights or the few horizontal scratches as a proper method of representing water then we deny ourselves the pleasure of marine-painting and of pencil-drawing. The art of the painter is possible only if we are willing to allow him to contradict the facts of nature so that he may delight us with the truth of nature as he sees it. In the preface to his most abidingly popular play, the "Dame aux Camélias," the younger Dumas declared that there is

in all the arts a share, larger or smaller but indispensable, which must be left to convention. Sculpture lacks color, painting lacks relief; and

they are rarely the one or the other, in the dimensions of the nature they represent. The more richly you bestow on a statue the color of life, the more surely you inflict upon it the appearance of death, because in the rigid attitude to which it is condemned by the material it is made of, it must always lack movement, which even more than color and form is the proof of life.

Still more striking is the passage in which the late John La Farge asserted the immitigable necessity of convention in these same twin-arts of painting and sculpture:—

When I work as an artist I begin at once by discarding the way in which things are really done, and translating them at once into another material. Therein consists the pleasure that you and I take in the work of art,—perhaps a new creation between us. The pleasure that such and such a reality gives me and you has been transposed. The great depth and perspective of the world, its motion, its never resting, I have arrested and stopt upon a little piece of flat paper. That very fact implies that I consider the flatness of my paper a fair method of translating the non-existence of *any* flatness in the world that I look at. If I am a sculptor I make for you this soft, waving, fluctuating, colored flesh in an immovable, hard, rigid, fixt, colorless material, and it is this transposition which delights you; (as well as we in a lesser degree who have made it). Therefore at the very outset of my beginning to affect you by what is called the record of a truth, I am obliged to ask you to accept a number of the greatest impossibilities, evident to the senses, and sometimes disturbing, when the convention supposed to be agreed upon between you and myself is understood only by one of the two parties.

II.

These quotations from La Farge and from Dumas call attention to the essential conditions of the arts of painting and of sculpture,—that the artists do not merely depart from reality; they contradict it absolutely. Only by so contradicting it can they provide us with the specific pleasure that we expect from their respective arts. The portrait painter has to present the head of his sitter motionless on a flat surface; and the portrait sculptor has to present the head of his sitter motionless and without color, or rather with the uniform tint of his material, clay or plaster, marble or bronze. And the public accepts these greatest impossibilities not only without protest but without any overt consciousness that they are impossibilities. The public, as a whole, is not aware that it is a party to an implied contract; it is so accustomed to the essential conventions of these two arts that it receives the result of their application as perfectly natural.

In fact, the public can scarcely be said to have made the tacit bargain; rather has it inherited the implied contract from

its remotest ancestors, the cave-men who scratched profile outlines on the bones of animals now for centuries extinct. The public is so accustomed to the methods of the painters and of the sculptors that when its attention is called to the fact that it is accepting the greatest impossibilities it is frankly surprised and not altogether pleased at the unexpected revelation. As a whole the public is not curious to analyze the sources of its pleasures; it is perfectly content to enjoy these pleasures without question as its fathers and its forefathers had enjoyed them generation after generation. To say this is to say that the fundamental conventions of painting and of sculpture have not been consciously agreed to by the existing public; they have just been taken for granted.

So in like manner have the fundamental conventions of the drama and of the music-drama been taken for granted generation after generation, although they involve departures from the fact, contradictions of the fact, impossibilities (to borrow *La Farge's* exact word) quite as great as those which underly and make possible painting and sculpture. Just as the conventions of the graphic arts were established by the cave-dwellers who made the first primitive sketches of the mastodon, so the conventions of the dramatic arts were willingly accepted by the spectators of the earliest dance-pantomime more or less spontaneously evolved to celebrate the coming of the springtime or the gathering of the harvest.

And the permanent conventions of the drama are accepted by the public because they are for its benefit, to heighten its pleasure, to prevent it from being bored or even from having its attention distracted by minor things not pertinent to the matter in hand. In real life all stories are straggling; they are involved with extraneous circumstance and they continue indefinitely into the future as they began indefinitely in the past. The playwright arbitrarily chooses a point of departure; he resolutely eliminates all accompanying circumstances and all environing characters not contributory to the arbitrary end upon which he has decided. He peoples his plot with only the characters absolutely needed; and he conducts his action swiftly from start to finish, heaping situation upon situation, so as to arouse and retain and stimulate the interest of the spectators as the artificially compacted story moves irresistibly and inevitably to its climax.

His characters always make use of his native tongue, which is also the native tongue of the audience. In "*Hamlet*" the Danes

all speak English; in "Romeo and Juliet" the Italians all speak English; and in "Julius Cæsar" the Romans all speak English. Moreover they all make use of an English that no mortal man ever used in real life, not even Shakespeare himself. Every one of them always expresses himself accurately and adequately, and completely, with no hesitations, no repetitions, no fumbling for words; and every one of them apprehends instantly and understands precisely everything that every one else may say to him. All the languages used, whether in prose or in verse, are highly condensed, inexorably compact, transparently clear. There is no need to point out that this is a state of linguistic efficiency unknown in every day life, filled with the halting babble of myriad insignificancies. Yet this departure from reality, this contradiction of the fact, this impossibility, is assented to not only gladly but unthinkingly. The bargain is not consciously made, it is taken for granted, partly because it is for the benefit of the spectators and partly because it is an ancestral inheritance.

These are all essential conventions of the drama, without which it could not exist. They can be found in the plays of every people, ancient or modern, civilized or savage, in the lofty tragedies of Athens, two thousand years ago, as well as in the farces of Paris five hundred years ago. They make possible the drama in prose, the drama in verse, the drama in song, and the drama in gesture. They are the fundamental conventions of the art, handed down by tradition from a time when the memory of man runneth not to the contrary and certain to survive so long as man shall find delight in the theater, in beholding a story set on the stage to be shown in action before his admiring eyes. From the beginning of things the playwright like the painter and the sculptor has always had to ask his audience "to accept a number of the greatest impossibilities."

III.

While these are all of them permanent and essential conventions of the drama, there are others peculiar to the music-drama and to it equally necessary, since without them it could not exist,—indeed it could not even have come into being.

We all know that the ordinary speech of man is prose, often careless and inaccurate, ragged and repetitious; and yet if we are to enjoy "Hamlet" or "Macbeth" we must accept the impossible supposition that Denmark and Scotland were once inhabited by a race of beings whose customary speech was English blank verse. We all know that the ordinary speech of man is

unrhythmic and unrimed; and yet if we are to find pleasure in "Tartuffe" we must allow that Paris in the reign of Louis XIV was peopled by men and women whose customary speech was the rimed alexandrine. So the convention which alone makes possible the beautiful art of pantomime—a form of drama restricted in its range but always delightful within its rigid limitations—is that there exists a race of beings who have never known articulate speech, who utter no sounds, and who communicate their feelings and their thoughts by the sole aid of gesture. If we are unwilling to assent to this monstrous proposition we deny ourselves instantly and absolutely all the pleasure that the art of pantomime can bestow.

Now, the convention which supports and makes possible the music-drama is that there is a race of beings whose natural speech is song, and only song, with no recourse to merely spoken words. It is by the aid of song alone that the persons who people grand opera can communicate with one another, can transmit information, can express their emotions. Of course, this is a proposition quite as monstrous as that upon which the art of pantomime is based,—or as those upon which the arts of painting and sculpture are founded. It is a proposition which any plain man of everyday common sense is at liberty to reject unhesitatingly; and no one has any right to blame him. All we have a right to do is to point out that the acceptance of this convention is a condition precedent to the enjoyment of opera and that he who absolutely refuses to be a party to the contract, thereby deprives himself of all the delights which the music-drama may afford.

Tolstoy was one of those who felt keenly the inherent absurdity of opera, if the test of reality is applied to it,—although oddly enough he seems never to have become conscious that painting and sculpture are just as remote from the facts of nature. In his curiously individual treatise on "What is Art?" he narrates his visit to an opera-house while a performance of Wagner's "Siegfried" was taking place. This music-drama did not interest him and he held it up to ridicule by the aid of the inexpensive device of satirically narrating the story as it was shown in action and of describing realistically the appearance and gestures and utterances of the performers.

When I arrived, Tolstoy writes, an actor sat on the stage amid scenery intended to represent a cave, and before something which was meant to represent a smith's forge. He was dressed in tights, with a cloak of skins, wore a wig, and an artificial beard, and with white, weak, genteel hands

beat an impossible sword with an unnatural hammer in a way in which no one uses a hammer; and at the same time, opening his mouth in a strange way, he sang something incomprehensible.

This quotation is sufficient to show Tolstoy's unsympathetic attitude and his unwillingness to accept the implied contract which opera calls for. Apparently Tolstoy was present at a performance not as perfect artistically as it ought to have been; but it is equally apparent that he would have been just as hostile if the performance had attained to an ideal perfection. What he was condemning was the music-drama as an art-form; and the animus of his adverse verdict is his unexpressed expectation that opera ought to withstand the test of reality. But opera is always unnatural and impossible. It is absurd and monstrous that the dying Tristan's last breath should be powerful enough to reach to the top gallery of a large opera-house and that the Rhine-maidens should sing as they are swimming under water; but it is just as unnatural, impossible, absurd and monstrous that Hamlet should speak English blank verse and that the Mona Lisa should be motionless and without relief.

In fact, the attitude of the sophisticated Tolstoy, familiar with all the apparatus of culture, is not unlike that of the unsophisticated redskin whose portrait was once outlined by a white visitor to the camp of the tribe and who gazed at his own counterfeit presentment in wondering silence and then plaintively asked, "Where is the other side of my face?"

Here we recall again the final sentence of the pregnant passage earlier quoted from La Farge: *I am obliged to ask you to accept a number of the greatest impossibilities evident to the senses and sometimes disturbing when the convention supposed to be agreed upon between you and myself is understood only by one of the two parties.*

IV

Although the music-drama cannot provide pleasure for those who do not understand the convention or who wilfully refuse to accept it, "the true children of the opera-world," as Mr. Parker felicitously terms them, are so accustomed to this convention that they are rarely conscious of it. Nevertheless they do not wish to be unduly reminded of it and to have their attention called to its various and manifold consequences. Wagner was wise in his generation in preferring to build his plots upon the legends of once-upon-a-time, because it is always easier to make-believe when we allowed ourselves to be transported on a magic carpet

to that remote, vague and fantastic period. As we know that the Rhine-maidens never existed anywhere or anywhen, we never think of cavilling at their ability to sing while they are swimming under water.

But when a battleship swings at anchor and when Pinkerton produces a decanter and syphon to mix a whiskey and soda, we can hardly help being conscious of the artistic incongruity between these realities and the impossibility of Pinkerton's extending his invitation in song, which we know not to be the mode of expression natural to an American of our own time asking a friend to take a drink. The sound rule for any artist would seem to be that, whatever his special art, he should carefully avoid everything which tends to awaken in the spectators the consciousness that they are parties to a bargain. The contract holds best when it is implicit, when neither party gives it a thought, and when both parties abide by it. "The dramatist," so Lessing declared, "must avoid everything that can remind the spectators of their illusion, for as soon as they are reminded, the illusion is gone."

This is the rule that Mr. William Gillette broke in his "Sherlock Holmes" when he allowed one of his characters to describe the invisible fourth wall of the gas-chamber to which the cool and keen-witted detective was to be lured,—that fourth wall which had to be supposed away, so that the audience could hear and see what is taking place upon the stage. This same rule was again violated by Mr. Jerome K. Jerome in the "Passing of the Third Floor Back" and by Sir James Barrie in the "New Word," when these playwrights set a fender and fire-irons down by the prompter's box, thus asking the spectators to believe that there was an invisible fireplace in the invisible wall.

Nearly a score of years ago I was present at a performance of "La Traviata" in the opera-house at Vienna; and I was forced to observe the disadvantage of an ill-advised attempt at realistic exactitude in the realm of operatic convention. I had been accustomed to see Verdi's opera set in scenery of no particular place and of no particular period,—and therefore not calling attention to itself; and I was also used to beholding the consumptive heroine arrayed in the very latest Paris gown while her lovers wore a nondescript costume as dateless and as characterless as the scenery itself. The manager of the Vienna opera-house had unfortunately remembered that Verdi's score was composed to a book made out of the "Dame aux Camélias" of the younger Dumas, originally performed in Paris in 1852; and therefore he had sought an accurate reproduction of a series of Parisian

rooms, with the draperies and the furniture of 1852, while the characters, male and female, lovely heroine and disconsolate lovers, were attired according to the French fashion-plates of that date. In the ballroom-scene therefore I beheld all the male members of the chorus habited in the evening-dress of 1852 and carrying under their arms the closed crush-hat which had been invented by the ingenious M. Gibus only a little earlier.

And I then had it brought home to me as never before how monstrously impossible the convention of opera is—and must be. I need not say that as I sat there in the mood of unconscious enjoyment I regretted having my attention wantonly called to the essential and permanent and inevitable convention by which alone the music-drama is made possible. It struck me not only as unwise but even as a little unfair.